DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 420 966 EC 306 538

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TITLE Sight Word Lists: Beneficial or a Waste of Time for Students with Disabilities?
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Development; Daily Living Skills; *Disabilities; Educational Strategies; Elementary Secondary Education; Generalization; *Instructional Effectiveness; School Community Relationship; *Sight Vocabulary; Student Centered Curriculum; Surveys; *Word Lists; Word Recognition

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the use of sight word lists in the instruction of students with disabilities. A survey of 25 restaurants in a Midwestern U.S. city was conducted to examine the validity and efficacy of two widely accepted public school reading word lists. It was found that neither of the word lists contained more than 46 percent of the words contained in the study. The inappropriate use of available instructional time on commercially available sight word lists is discussed and recommendations are provided to a variety of educators to help them become more aware of the importance of analyzing their local community in designing educational curriculum for students with disabilities. Recommendations include: (1) future research is needed to determine the variability among various community reading requirements; (2) teachers should reexamine how they view success for their students to ensure that academic time is spent on meaningful learning experiences; (3) school districts should acquire a vast amount of information prior to the adoption of curriculum materials; (4) school districts should allocate resources to study their local community; and (5) teachers should explore instructional strategies that promote the generalization of skills from school to post-school environments. (Contains 21 references.) (Author/CR)

Sight word lists: Beneficial or a waste of time for students with disabilities?

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Abstract

This article explores the use of sight word lists in the instruction of students with disabilities. A survey of restaurants in a Midwest city was conducted to examine the validity and efficacy of two widely accepted public school reading word lists. It was found that neither of the word lists contained more that 46% of the words found in the current study. These results indicate that valuable instructional time may be spent inappropriately on commercially available sight word lists. Recommendations are provided to a variety of educators to help them become more aware of the importance of analyzing their local community in the design of educational curriculum for students with disabilities.

In 1977 the national cost of special education services was roughly one billion dollars. Currently that cost has soared to $30 billion (U. S. Department of Education, 1996). Despite these large expenditures, students with disabilities are still exiting school without the necessary skills to function successfully in their local community (Harris & Associates, 1994; Hasazi, Hock, & Cravedi-Cheng, 1992; Hughes, Eisenman, Hwang, Kim, Killian, & Scott, 1997; Wagner, 1995). For instance, the United States Department of Education released a recent report to Congress that found that within 3 to 5 years after high school, only 20% of students with disabilities were functioning independently in living arrangements, social relationships, and employment (Psy-Ed. Corp., 1994). The National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) also found disappointing results as only 57% of individuals with disabilities were employed three to five years after graduation from high school (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

This high unemployment rate costs society vast amount of money each year. For instance, unemployed individuals do not contribute to the societal tax base and rely on public assistance programs such as, Supplemental Security Income, Medicaid, and food stamps for financial support. Although this support is helpful, individuals with disabilities are still twice as likely to be poor as compared to people without disabilities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). These negative findings make it painfully obvious that educators must re-examine and change their educational programming in order to promote the post-school success of all students.

Educators can start this change process by analyzing the curriculum used to educate students with disabilities. This analysis will ensure that educational time is not spent on meaningless activities that do not enhance the lives of our youth. It is apparent that the use of time is the key variable in improving the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities. Also, this curriculum re-examination will allow educators the opportunity to identify instructional strategies that work and do not work.

Curriculum for Students With Disabilities

Historically, academic skills have been the focus of instruction for all students. Teaching students to read, write, and solve mathematical problems was thought to prepare them for the adult world (Cipani & Spooner, 1994). Educators commonly designed developmental curriculums to help students learn advanced skills after prerequisite skills are acquired. For example, reading whole words is taught after a student masters numerous prerequisite skills, which include identifying all upper-and lower-case letters, and the regular sound-symbol relationships of all letters. For students with disabilities, skills are taught in the same order as they would be taught to students without disabilities, without concern for a learner's chronological age (Cipani & Spooner, 1994). Students with disabilities commonly spend vast amounts of time in elementary, middle, and high school working on pre-academic skills. Students with disabilities who spend their school years learning traditional academic skills do not learn skills that lead to greater independence in the "real world" (Clark & Kolstoe, 1995; Rusch, Destefano, Rusch, Phelps & Szymanski, 1992; Snell, 1993).

During the last decade, educators have voiced opposition to using the developmental curriculum approach for teaching persons with disabilities. Students with disabilities have learning and performance characteristics that call for a nontraditional approach to teaching selected academic skills. These individuals require more instructional trials to acquire skills, have difficulty generalizing and synthesizing skills, and exhibit short and long-term memory deficits (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1994; Hunt & Marshall, 1994).

Today, the developmental approach to curriculum for students with disabilities has been replaced by a functional life-skills approach to curriculum (Brolin, 1995). This approach is based on the belief that students should learn skills that will make them as

independent and productive as possible in a variety of community environment. In using this functional approach, skills are targeted for instruction based on the chronological age of the student, the immediate usefulness of the skill, and the degree of independence the skill, once acquired will allow the individual (Brolin, 1995).

Cronin and Patton (1993) provided a theoretical model to help educators design functional life-skill curriculum. Their model focuses on the six major domains of adulthood. Those domains include: (a) home and family, (b) leisure pursuits, (c) community involvement, (d) employment and education, (e) physical and emotional health, and (f) personal responsibility and relationships. For each domain several major life demands can be identified such as, general job skills, financial management, child rearing, and travel. Educators must identify the skills required to be successful in the local community (Chadsey-Rusch, Rusch, & O'Reilly, 1991; Smith, Patton & Ittenbach, 1994). The local generation of life skill competencies will reflect the differences in many locales throughout the United States. The differences reflected in locally generated curricula may include vocabulary (such as the use of the word "neutral ground" for median on a street or boulevard), transportation (subway, ferry, bus, streetcar) culture (type of music, such as country, pop, soul, and jazz), shopping practices (bagging versus not bagging your own groceries), and driving ordinances. The content of a functional life skill curriculum is based on the skills individuals need to be successful in their local community (Cipani & Spooner, 1994).

Once community specific functional life-skill curriculum have been developed, educational activities must be created to allow students the opportunity to practice or apply their skills in the natural environment (Snell, 1993). This type of experience is very valuable as it builds students confidence and self-esteem to function in their community. For example when learning money skills, students are taught basic skills in their

classroom and would later be taken to a community business to practice and generalize their skills. Clark and Kolstoe (1995) suggested that to promote future employment teachers should start with on-campus work experiences and move to community work experiences when the students reach a level of success on campus. For instance, some of those experiences may include cooking a meal for school faculty or placing students as workers with other teachers, cafeteria personnel, and the custodians for a period of time every week. Upon the acquisition of basic functional life skills students are given opportunities to participate in community activities to reinforce skills learned in their classroom (Brolin 1995; Smith, Patton & Ittenbach, 1994).

Community Skill Assessment and Analysis

To prepare students for post-school environments each school system's curriculum must be specific to the community in which its students reside (Snell, 1993). For instance, this might include repeated assessment of the local labor market to determine the major employers in the community, the types of employment most commonly available, and the types of employment that have been obtained by individuals with disabilities (Moon, Inge, Wehman, Brooks, & Barcus, 1990). Renzaglia and Hutchins (1988) also explored strategies to design vocational curriculum.They suggested to generate a list of local businesses and categorizing them by job types (e.g., food service, janitorial, industrial). After generating a list of businesses, special education teachers or other school representatives should initiate contact with a sample of employers to identify the types of jobs that will be available to students upon graduation. After interviews with the employers and observation in the business community, school personnel are more prepared to design community-referenced curriculum.

Educators must continue to increase their awareness of the skill requirements necessary to participate in commonly occurring life activities in the local community. Knowledge of the local community skill requirements such as, reading, math,

communication, and social skills will allow educators the opportunity to design educational activities that increase the chance that students with disabilities will develop the necessary skills needed to function in post-school environments (Clark, Field, Patton, Brolin, & Sitlington, 1994).

One such life activity for analysis is a persons ability to dine at a community eating establishment. Eating at a local dining establishment allows individuals to meet their basic physiological, social, and emotional needs. The memories of the laughter of friends and family provide individuals with a sense of belonging and a higher quality of life. Currently, very little information exists on the reading requirements necessary to dine at local community eating establishments. Information is needed in to order to study local education agency curriculum experiences. Therefore, the purpose of the current study was to assess the reading requirements of local community dining establishments. Results of the current study along with other reading research may result in the development of innovative curriculum ideas and education policies.

METHOD

Sample

A Midwest city was the community selected for the current study. The 25,000 people city is a former mining community located in southeast Kansas. The city is one of 18 Kansas cities designated as a National Main Street City. It is the home of a university which provides a variety of intellectual and cultural events such as the Performing Arts and Lecture Series and the Solo and Chamber Music Series.

Procedure

To identify community dining opportunities a listing was obtained from the city Chamber of Commerce. A total of 50 dining opportunities were available for the current study. A random sample was conducted to identify 25 or 50% of dining opportunities to be included in the current

study. The author visited the dining establishment to obtain a menu of items available for use in the current study. If the proprietor of the establishment would not allow removal of the menu, a yellow legal pad was used to copy the menu. Each menu was then entered into a word processing computer program to create a dining establishment data base.

Dining Establishment Data Base

The dining establishment data base consisted of three components. Component one included the twenty-five individual menus. Each menu was entered by restaurant name with individual words listed.

Component two included a five category word list. The categories included (1) beverages, (2) sandwiches, (3) vegetables, (4) desserts, and other. Each word on the menu was placed in the corresponding category. If words appeared frequently on a menu they were entered only once in the appropriate category.

Component three consisted of a spreadsheet for analysis of the data. The spreadsheet contained the categories of the menu items, frequency which words appeared, and the percentage of individual words appearing on all menus.

Results

An analysis of the twenty-five menus provided valuable descriptive data. It was found that 631 different words appeared on the menus. The most frequently occurring word was cheese followed by sandwich and large (See Table 1). Overall, twenty words appeared on 50% or more of the menus. Of those items, 37% were in the other category followed by the categories of beverage, sandwich, and vegetables (23%, 20%, and 20% respectively).

<Table 1 here>

When examining the five word categories it was found that the category of other had the largest number of words followed by the beverage, sandwich, vegetable, and dessert categories.

Table 2 lists the ten most frequently occurring words in each category. (A complete listing of menu words is available from the author).

<Table 2 here>

Two widely accepted public school reading word lists were used to compare the 30 most frequently occurring words from the current study with traditional academic sight word instruction. Initially, the Dolch Basic Sight Word list was used. The Dolch Basic Sight Word List consists of 220 sight words that make up 50 to 65 percent of the words that students encounter in elementary school basal readers (Mercer & Mercer, 1993). When comparing the two word lists it was found that five or 16% of the words appeared on both the Dolch Basic Sight Word List and the study word list. Those words included: small, or, and, with, and, of.

The Edmark Functional Word Series was also used in the current study. The Edmark Series is a listing of 400 words necessary for independent living in the community. The reading series is broken into four 100 word categories entitled (1) Signs Around You, (2) Fast Food/Restaurant Words, (3) Grocery Words, and (4) Job/Work Words. When comparing the 30 most frequently occurring words in the current study with the Fast Food/Restaurant Word List it was found that 14 or 46% of words appeared on both the Edmark Fast Food/Restaurant Word List and the study word list. Table 3 list words found on both the Edmark Fast Food/Restaurant Word List and the study word list.

<Table 3 here>

Discussion

The findings of this study indicated the wide variability of words found on dining establishment menus. A total of 631 different words were identified on 25 menus. Of the 631 words, only 20 words were found on 50% of the menus. Also, only two words, cheese and sandwich, appeared on 80% of the study menus.

Two word lists were used to compare the 30 most frequently occurring words from the current study with traditional academic sight word instruction. It was found that neither the Dolch Basic Sight Word List or the Edmark Functional Word Series contained more than 46% of the words found in the current study. These findings pose a serious problem for educators who rely on published material for educational instruction. Commercially available reading word lists may not benefit students with disabilities. Time may be spent inappropriately learning reading sight words that do not directly correlate with the local community skill requirements. This inappropriate use of academic time may result in students with disabilities not gaining the skills needed to successfully function in their local community.

This study presents serious challenges for educators. For instance, in order for educators to design appropriate education curriculum they must first become aware of their local communities. A greater awareness will allow educators to gain information to develop curriculum experiences that focus on skills needed to be successful in a variety of post-school environments. An increased community awareness will also allow educators to adapt commercially available materials to meet the situation specific demands of their local community.

Conclusions

This study points the way for other community-based reading studies. As this investigation was based upon only one community activity, future studies are warranted to determine the reading requirements of a variety of daily activities. It is also recommended that a variety of communities be studied to determine the variability among various community reading requirements. In depth qualitative analyses with groups of education professionals could also be conducted to determine the degree with which individuals assess their local community when designing curriculum.

Investigations of state department of education curriculum requirements and university training programs must be conducted to determine if emphases are in place on community-based curriculum development. State departments of education must require administrators and elementary and secondary teachers to complete a community-based curriculum course for professional certification. An in-depth analysis of university teacher training programs is needed to ensure that future educators have knowledge of how to assess their local community when designing curriculum.

School districts are encouraged to acquire a vast amount of information prior to the adoption of curriculum materials. District level curriculum decision makers must require publishers to provide empirical research validating the quality of their curriculum content. Important questions to be asked include: (1) Does the publisher have quantitative and qualitative data indicating the effectiveness of the material? (2) Is there information that the curriculum has been used successfully in demographically similar school districts throughout the United States? (3) Does the curriculum information describe manageable responsibilities and requirements for teachers and administrators? Answers to these questions and others will help district level decision-makers to select curriculum material that will benefit all students in their local school district.

School districts are also urged to allocate resources to study their local community. A group of teachers could be hired during their vacation time to study and create a document that articulates the skills needed to successfully participate in a variety of community activities. It is recommended that human growth and development areas be used as a framework for skill identification and analysis. For instance, what cognitive, social, emotional, moral, language, and physical skills are needed for a person to ride the local transit system. Information obtained from the local transit system and other community activity analyses will act as a springboard to evaluate and design educational curriculums. This group of local school district teachers could also conduct professional

development activities to disseminate their findings and to teach others how to assess and analyze their local community skill requirements. By empowering their teachers local school district leaders can enhance the psychological wellness of their staff and promote the post-school success of all students.

Recommendations also exist for teachers. Teachers are urged to re-examine how they view success for their students to ensure that academic time is spent on meaningful learning experiences. Academic time must be spent on helping all students acquire a wide repertoire of skills that will ultimately allow them to live independently, gain meaningful employment, and participate in a variety of leisure activities in their local community. It is recommended that teachers use the question, "How does this activity help my students to function in their present and possible future environments?", as a framework to guide their instructional decision making. Consistent use of this question along with a thorough understanding of the skill requirements needed to participate in a variety of community activities will enable teachers to design instructional activities that enhance the post-school success of all students.

Teachers are also urged to explore instructional strategies that promote the generalization of skills from school to post-school environments. It is recommended that teachers use integrated thematic units as a means to help students to see the inter-relationship between academic content areas. By helping students to have a broader understanding of the connectiveness of subject areas teachers will increase the likelihood that students generalize their skills to a variety of post-school environments. Teachers must be willing to collaborate with fellow teachers, parents, and local community members to design integrated thematic units for the betterment of all students.

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Table 1

Thirty Most Frequently Occuring Dinining Establishment Words

Item	Frequency	Percentage of Dining Establishments
cheese	21	84
sandwich	20	80
large	18	72
coffee	17	68
salad	17	68
small	16	64
mushrooms	15	62
ham	15	60
or	15	60
and	15	60
bacon	15	60
with	14	56
steak	14	56
french fries	14	56
barbecue	13	52
hamburger	13	52
chicken breast	13	52
of	13	52
served	13	52
hot tea	13	52
drink	12	48
iced tea	12	48
milk	12	48
onion rings	12	48
choice	12	48
dinner	12	48
Dr. Pepper	11	44
potatoes	11	44
Diet Pepsi	10	40
onion	10	40
fried	10	40

Item	Frequency	Percentage of Dining Establishments
Sandwiches		
sandwich	20	80
ham	15	60
steak	14	56
barbecue	13	52
hamburger	13	52
chicken breast	13	52
roast beef	9	36
fish	9	36
cheeseburger	9	36
ham and cheese	6	24
Beverages		
coffee	17	68
hot tea	13	52
drink	12	48
iced tea	12	48
milk	12	48
Dr. Pepper	11	44
Dr. Pepsi	10	40
Pepsi	8	32
beverages	6	24
Slice	6	24
Vegetables		
salad	17	68
mushrooms	15	60
french fries	14	56
onion rings	12	48
potatoes	11	44
onion	10	40
vegetables	9	36
tomatoes	8	32
potato salad	7	28
cole slaw	6	24
Dessert		
ice cream	6	24
pie	4	16
dessert	4	16
cones	4	16
sundae	3	12
apple sauce	3	12
cheesecake	3	12
cookie	2	8
cake	2	8
fruit	2	8
Other		
cheese	21	84
large	18	72
small	16	64
or	15	60
and	15	60
bacon	15	60
with	14	56
of	13	52
served	13	52
choice	12	48

Table 2

Ten Most Frequently Occuring Words in Each Study Category

Table 3

Words Found on the Edmark Fast Food/Restaurant Word List, Dolch Word List, and the Study Word List

Item
fried
or
and
with
steak
barbecue
chicken breast
of
served
hot tea
drink
choice
potatoes
diet Pepsi
small

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